

The Activities of the Bengal Home Industries Association, 1917-1940

Author: Iftikhar-ul-Awwal

Publication year: 1979-1981

Volumes: XXIV-VI

**Journal: Journal of The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh
(Humanities)**

Pages: 179-188

ACTIVITIES OF THE BENGAL HOME INDUSTRIES ASSOCIATION, 1917-1940

By IFTIKHAR-UL-AWWAL*

Next to agriculture, the economic condition of the largest number of people in Bengal depended on cottage industries.¹ Yet this important branch of the economy remained neglected for a long time with the result that many cottage industries decayed and many more were in a moribund condition.² The Bengal Home Industries Association, founded in 1917 by Lady Carmichael, aimed at the revival and regeneration of cottage industries of the Presidency. The objects of the Association, as gathered from the Association's annual report for the year 1934-35, were as follows :

- (a) To promote and develop home industries, arts and crafts in the Presidency of Bengal and to do all things necessary for the attainments of those objects;
- (b) To collect and publish or otherwise furnish information with respect to home industries, arts and crafts in Bengal ;
- (c) To establish or assist home industries by:
 - (i) the purchase of raw materials and articles necessary for their manufacture; by advances of money or furnishing of guarantees to encourage such manufacture and to place it upon the market ;
 - (ii) by promoting the formation of credit societies or other associations, having for this object the extension of the sale of its products ;
- (d) To promote exhibitions, show rooms or other public displays of industrial work and the raising of funds from individuals, private or public bodies.³

But since the Association was a voluntary organization and it did not have sufficient funds to carry out all the objects for which it was founded, it

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Dacca University.

¹ Nearly one million people depended for their livelihood on the cottage industries of this province. *Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1917-18*, p. ii.

² A comprehensive note on the industries which have decayed or were threatened with extinction owing to the competition of mass production could be found in the *Census of India*, Vol. V, Bengal and Sikkim, Part I, Report (Calcutta, 1933), pp. 303-309.

³ Bangladesh Secretariat Records : Proceedings of the Department of Agriculture and Industries, Bengal (Industries Branch), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1937. Henceforth Bangladesh Secretariat Records are referred to as BSR and the Proceedings of the Agricultural and Industries Department as PAI(I).

confined its work mainly to the financing and marketing of home industry products in Calcutta.

The Organization of Production

Information regarding the structure of production is scanty. From the material that we have at our disposal it is known that the Association purchased goods from factories, institutes or schools as well as from individual workers. Details regarding those institutes or factories or workers are, however, not fully available. But we know that the number of such factories, institutes or schools with whom the Association placed regular orders and whose goods it purchased in the closing years of the 1930's numbered 75.⁴ This number excluded individual workers and weavers in each institute or factory.⁵ We also come across one or two references of factories and schools from where goods were purchased. Thus it is known that the Association's wood buckles were curved by the boys of the Calcutta Deaf and Dumb School⁶ and that orders received for embroidered goods in 1939-40 were made by the Babnam Chekan workers.⁷ There is also good reason to think that handicrafts were also supplied by such institutes as the Home Industries Association, Faridpur and the Home Industries Association, Barisal, which came into existence in the early 1920s.⁸

Textile goods were the most important items which the Association manufactured and sold. According to one estimate, it constituted nearly 90 per cent of the total sales income of the Association in the mid-1930's.⁹ Among the textile goods, it sold only certain types of artistic handloom products which did not compete with the ordinary mill-made products. The Association manufactured, among other varieties of cotton textiles, Dacca sarees, cloth (Lai Champhais) from Tippera, printed cotton handkerchiefs and various kinds of dress materials.¹⁰ The Association also organized the production of heavy fancy cotton weaves suitable for upholstery and hangings and developed and standar-

⁴ See, copy of letter No. SJ/2420, dated May 1, 1940 from the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Association's Half-Yearly Report April to September, 1940 in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

⁷ See, letter dated the 24th April, 1940 from the Honorary Treasurer of the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

⁸ Department of Industries, Bengal : *Annual Administration Report of the Department of Industries, Bengal for the year 1921*, p. 14 ; *Ibid.*, 1922, p. 17.

⁹ BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1937.

¹⁰ Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, July 13, 1922, Vol. VIII, p. 564 ; and BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

dised various finer muslins into new designs and colours.¹¹ These had an excellent reception from the buying public with the result that the Association was able to provide work to a considerable number of weavers. In 1940, the Association also developed a new type of cotton woven rug which found a ready sale in Calcutta and soon became an important sideline of business.¹² Besides cotton textiles, the Association manufactured silk articles like *endi* coating, and *chadders*, *garad* silk suiting and sarees, printed silk handkerchiefs, plain white silk handkerchiefs, printed dress materials and dyed silks.¹³ Their printed silks were very popular throughout India owing to the great improvement made in the quality of the silk as well as in weaving and printing. Other textile products with which the Association dealt included *Kantha* work (table-mats, runners, tray-cloths, bibs, pram-covers, bed-covers), *Kashida* embroidered goods (table-cloths, runners, table-mats, scarves and pieces by the yard) and woollen rugs, blankets and shawls.¹⁴ Apart from textile goods, the Association also assisted other cottage industries such as Brass and Bellmetal, plated goods—knives and other articles of that nature, Cane goods, Ivory and Horn goods, Mother-of-Pearl, Pottery, clay models, woodwork, Leather goods, and celluloid goods.¹⁵

Since one of the main objects of the Association was to check the exorbitant profits of the middlemen, it placed direct orders to the institute or factory rather than with any middleman. "We place our orders with the actual weavers and let them know our actual requirement. Financial assistance is often given to allow them to get on with the order. We then purchase the goods from them", stated the Honorary Secretary of the Association.¹⁶ This financial assistance was of two kinds—aid in the form of money grant and grant of materials, e. g., yarn, raw materials, etc. This function of advancing money to cottage workers or institutes was performed in Bengal by no other organization including that of the Good Companions founded in 1934 with the object of marketing the products of industrial missions.

The Association also tried to improve the designs and quality of its products. With this end in view it employed an expert designer, Mrs. Hance (who had once worked for the Calico Printer's Association of Manchester on

¹¹ See letter dated 11th January, 1938 from the Hon. Secy. of the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

¹² Association's Half-Yearly Report, April to September, 1940 in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Letter of 11th January, 1938 from the Hon. Secy. of the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal, in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

a salary of £800 per annum) to supervise the work of the organization with a view to introducing new designs and ideas among the producers and to keep in touch with changes in fashion among buyers both in the Home and Indian markets.¹⁷ In this regard, the Association also sought the help of the Government Weaving Institute, Serampore. It was with the help of the Serampore Weaving Institute that the Association brought out new attractive designs for their furnishing materials "never woven before on hand-loom".¹⁸ Its finer muslins woven into new designs and colours were claimed by the Association to be equal in quality with imported goods of this type.¹⁹ The Association was also pleased to report "that a great improvement" in the quality of the silk had been achieved due to careful supervision of weaving and that its printing had also "greatly improved and perfected" and that a variety of new designs in beautiful colour combinations had been brought out and well received by their numerous clients.²⁰ Besides, the Association also claimed to have "done something to revive the Vegetable Dyeing Industry of Bengal".²¹ It was also due to the vigilance of the Association's Secretary that the exquisite *Butidar saree* of Murshidabad was saved from extinction.²²

Marketing of Products

The demand of the Association's products was mainly restricted to the European community in Calcutta.²³ The reason for this is not difficult to see. The European public patronised fancy products to a larger extent than the Indians and hence the Association made it a point to cater to the taste and demands of the European public. Moreover, the Europeans were willing to pay higher prices for fancy products. From a business point of view, therefore, it was rather an advantage to appeal to the European public if they found a larger and more profitable market among them. However, the Secretary of the Association claimed that they also catered to the needs of the middle-class Indians. But he agreed that the Association was unable to provide anything

¹⁷ See Notes leading to the revival of the grant-in-aid to the Association in BSR : PAI(I), A Proceedings, Bundle No. 3, November 1935, No. 28, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ Association's Half-Yearly Report, April to September, 1940 in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

¹⁹ Letter of 11th January 1938, from the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

²⁰ Association's Half-Yearly Report, April to September, 1940 in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

²¹ Letter of 11th January 1938 from the Association in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

²² BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 11, File No. 1W/21 of 1938.

²³ BSR : PAI(I), A Proceedings, Bundle No. 2, File No. 2-G-2 of April 1927, Nos. 10-11, p. 1.

for the poor people as "they must, of necessity, buy in the cheapest market".²⁴ However, it did go into the question of producing simple and inexpensive Indian sarees but after full investigation it was found that the Association could not produce a saree anything near the price prevailing in the local stores.²⁵ Besides individuals, it also supplied orders from the Vice-regal estates and from the Government Houses of the different provinces.²⁶ It had also developed new outlets for its products in different parts of India by appointing travelling agents who procured regular orders from customers.²⁷

In their endeavour to extent the business, the Association developed trade-links with various foreign countries. In 1934-35, it completed an order from Messrs. Selfridge and Co., London, for goods worth £1,000.²⁸ In 1935, a London agency was set up under its auspices to push the sale of cottage products. The Chairman of the Council was Lady Carmichael and she had the active support of Lady Wellington, Lady Stephenson and other friends of the Association then resident in England. The Honorary Treasurer of the Council was Sir David Meek, Trade Commissioner for India in England.²⁹ It was mainly due to the help of the London Council that Bengal silks were once again exported to Britain. By the end of 1937, the Association was sending goods to 7 London firms, 2 New York, 2 Bermuda and 1 Paris firms.³⁰ During 1939-40, it succeeded in establishing a definite export trade to the U. S. A. for silk goods and had "already supplied some hundreds of rupees worth of goods to America" through an agent.³¹ It also supplied goods ordered for silks and furnishing materials to two firms in Australia and had received "substantial orders" for furnishing materials from the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements.³² It had also established contacts with buyers from other parts of the world including Europe and Canada. In 1940, the Association

²⁴ Letter dated 11th January, 1938 from the Hon. Secy. of the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI (I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Association's Half-Yearly Report, April to September 1940 in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Notes leading to the revival of grant-in-aid to the Association in BSR : PAI (I), A Proceedings, Bundle No. 3, November 1935, No. 28, p. 1.

²⁹ Letter of 11th January, 1938 from the Hon. Secy. of the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Letter dated April 24, 1940 from the Hon. Treasurer of the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

³² Letter No. SJ/2420 dated May 1, 1940 from the Association in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

received a substantial order from Australia for hand-embroidered handkerchiefs enough to "keep the embroiders busy for several months".³³ Unfortunately, owing to the continuance of the war, it lost some of the important markets including France and Britain at least for the time being.³⁴

Information regarding the value and volume of sales of the Bengal Home Industries Association is insufficient. But from the yearly sales figures as compiled from the available data (see Table 1.1), we find that the sales

Table 1.1 Total Sales of the Bengal Home Industries Association, from 1917-18 to 1925-26 & 1934-35 to 1940 (figures in Rs.)

Year	Amount (in Rs.)
July 1917-18 (March)	21,176
1918-19	97,611
1919-20	67,851
1920-21	43,615
1921-22	33,559
1922-23	29,367
1923-24	18,519
1924-25	30,352
1925-26	30,461
1934-35	27,840
1935-36	31,460
1936-37	57,947
1937 (April to Dec.)	50,592
1939-40	48,727
1940 (April to Augst.)	28,264

Source : *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings*, July 13, 1922, Vol. VIII, p. 564 ; BSR: PAI(I), A Proceedings, Bundle No. 2, File No. 2-G-2 of April 1927, Nos. 10-11. p. 2 ; BSR ; PAI (I), B proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1937 ; BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 2G/19 of 1940.

fluctuated greatly from year to year. Thus the sales of the Association was nearly a lakh of rupees in 1918-19 which came down to Rs. 18,519 in 1923-24. It is extremely difficult to account for such wild fluctuations in the yearly sales figures. The high sales figures of the early years of its existence was probably due to the pioneering zeal of Mr. Ascoli (a retired member of the

³³ Half-Yearly Report of the Association, April to September, 1940 in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

³⁴ *Ibid*,

I.C.S.) who tried to build up an efficient organisation for the benefit of cottage workers.³⁵ But with his departure, probably in the early 1920's, the management of the Association became "somewhat slack" and the shop could no more be run on business-like manner.³⁶ It so happened that important meetings had quite often to be postponed for want of quorum.³⁷ Coupled with the slackness of the members of the managing committee, the post war slump and the depression of the 1930's had their effect as well. With the reorganization of the Association towards the end of 1934 with Mrs. Amy Reid as its President and the restoration of the government's grants-in-aid from 1935-36, the Association once again picked up its sales from 1936-37 onwards.

Although the Bengal Home Industries Association was able to extend the market for Bengal's cottage industries, it did so by incurring substantial losses almost every year. An examination of accounts for the years 1920-21 to 1925-26, for example, disclosed the fact that the Association sold goods worth Rs. 2,25,000 to the public for Rs. 2,27,000 and in the process of doing so a total loss of Rs. 1,29,000 was incurred of which Rs. 1,00,000 was obtained from the public funds and Rs. 29,000 from the capital fund of the Association. In other words, for every rupee's worth of goods sold a loss of approximately 9 annas was incurred.³⁸ Losses were suffered in later years as well. Thus on 31 March, 1926 the Association was left with a capital fund of Rs. 52,528 and in May 1935 it had dwindled to no more than Rs. 5,000.³⁹ With the reorganization of the Association in 1934, it was, however, able to reduce its yearly losses substantially. Various reasons have been ascribed to account for this loss. Firstly, the Association had incurred a considerable amount of its expenditure for propaganda, experiments and organizational work to make home industries popular. In this regard its aims were quite different from an ordinary business house whose sole object was commercial profit. The Association had this to say in this regard "...we are faced with a peculiar difficulty. In order that we may help struggling industries we have frequently to buy the whole produce of a weaver—good, bad or indifferent. We cannot pick and choose as the weaver would rather go to a money-lender who will take over the whole of its products at a low cost, than allow us to pick and choose even if we paid better price for those which are readily saleable. If we carried on the depot purely as an ordinary shop, we could not think of buying anything which was not immediately marketable. On the other hand, in fostering Home Indus-

³⁵ *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings*, March 24, 1922, Vol. VII, No. 5, pp. 293-94.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* March 27, 1928, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, pp. 483-84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Notes leading to the revival of grant-in-aid to the Association in BSR : PAI(I), A Proceedings, Bundle No. 3, November 1935, No. 28, p. 6.

tries, we have to encourage the producers even by buying the results of his immature efforts. During the period of organization and propaganda it is absolutely necessary to do this even if we have to suffer loss now and again. We could only organise and guide producers if we be willing to suffer pioneer expenses."⁴⁰ The Association reiterated its position again in 1938: "We must not be confused with a business which merely buys and sells at a profit. We do not get the profit of a 'middleman'. In many cases we have to sell at a loss as compared with the expense of putting an article on the market. Where industries have to be revived, you will appreciate that there are many initial crude efforts which cannot be offered for sale but must nevertheless be paid for to encourage the villager and lead him to comparative perfection".⁴¹ Secondly, the apathy and unbusiness-like qualities of the managing committee prior to the reorganization of the Association in 1934 also resulted in loss. It was due to the committee's carelessness that one of their employees who was entrusted to start a branch shop defalcated with Rs. 30,000.⁴² There was also the frequent complaint that the Association was not vigilant enough in making money advances to cottage workers with the result that often it did not get back either money or goods.⁴³

Other Activities of the Association

Besides financing and marketing of home or cottage industry products, and of improving the design and quality of such products, the Association acted as an information bureau of all industrial products which were manufactured in Bengal. To furnish such information to interested parties, it maintained a list showing the different kinds of cottage industries carried on in various parts of the country and the manner in which things were collected and brought to Calcutta and sold there. Anybody could go to the office and get all the necessary information regarding industrial products.⁴⁴ Besides, the Association maintained a Show Room in Calcutta, organised exhibitions and participated in public displays. In July 1935, on the occasion of the visit of His Excellency the Viceroy and Countess of Wellington, the Association organised an exhibition.⁴⁵ It had also successfully exhibited its goods in the All-India Exhibition held at Lucknow and won several medals and prizes for weaving and printing.⁴⁶ In 1940, it dis-

⁴⁰ BSR : PAI (I), A Proceedings, Bundle No. 2, File No. 2-G-2 of April 1927, Nos. 10-11, p. 2.

⁴¹ Letter of 11th January, 1938 from the Hon. Secy. of the Association to the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI (I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

⁴² *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings*, March 24, 1922, Vol. VII, No. 5, pp. 293-94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, March 27, 1928, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, pp. 483-84.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, March 26, 1923, Vol. XI, No. 5, pp. 528-29.

⁴⁵ BSR : PAI (I), April 1936, No. 3, p. 4.

⁴⁶ BSR : PAI (I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

played its furnishing materials and silks at the exhibition at Wellington Square organised by the Bengal Handloom Industries Association.⁴⁷ The names of such organizations as the Home Industries Association, Faridpur and the Home Industries Association, Barisal are also highly suggestive that such Associations might have been promoted by the Bengal Home Industries Association as promotion of associations formed one of its functions.

Concluding Remarks

The Association was established at a time when there was no other organization doing similar work in Bengal. Being a voluntary organization from the very inception the Association was in receipt of an annual grant from the government varying from Rs.25,000 in 1919-20 to Rs. 10,000 in 1926-27.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, however, the grant-in-aid was stopped from 1927-28 onwards as the government thought that the Association had failed to reach a high stage of organization.⁴⁹ Due to the stoppage of the grant its work had to be drastically curtailed and within a few years its retail sales shop had to be closed down relinquishing its selling agency work to the Good Companions.⁵⁰ It was only on political grounds that the government once again renewed its monetary assistance from 1935-36 onwards.⁵¹ At about the same time, the Association also received funds from the Government of India's subvention to provincial

⁴⁷ Association's Half-Yearly Report, April to September, 1940 in BSR : PAI (I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.

⁴⁸ BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/7 of 1938.

⁴⁹ In fact, there were two solid blocks for and against the stoppage of the grant. The European block consisted of the Director of Industries, G. P. Hogg and the Council members A. N. Moberly and J. Donald. To them the Association stood for nothing but loss and mismanagement. On the other hand, G. S. Dutt, Secretary, Agriculture and Industries Department and Indian members of the Council S. N. Ali, K. C. Ray and A. K. Ghuznavi thought it otherwise. They were of the opinion that there was sufficient room for improvement and reorganization and therefore to throttle it at this stage would be absolutely disastrous. Ultimately, however, the decision was made not to subsidize the Association any longer. See, BSR : PAI(I), A Proceedings, Bundle No. 2, File No. 2-G-2 of April 1927, Nos. 10-11, pp. 1-6 ; *Ibid.*, No. 14, pp. 3-4 ; and BSR : PAI (I), February 1928, No. 13, pp. 25-26.

⁵⁰ Notes leading to the revival of the grant to the Association in BSR : PAI (I), A Proceedings, Bundle No. 3, November 1935, No. 28, p. 2.

⁵¹ Hon. K. G. M. Farouqi recommending the revival of the grant wrote on 5/1/35 : "...the Bengal Home Industries Association deserves every assistance from the Government at the present moment. Mr. Gandhi has now turned his attention to the revival of cottage industries, and it is extremely undesirable that the extremist section in the country should be able to enlist the sympathy and support of the masses by pointing to our inactivity in this direction as contrasted with their solicitude and exertions". See, *Ibid.*, p. 4.

governments for the development of handloom industry to the extent of Rs.75,000 spread over three years with effect from 1937-38.⁵² With the grants thus available, the Association was able to develop itself into a first rate marketing organization not only "able to organise manufacture of new variety of textile goods among the Bengal cottage workers but also to find new outlets for the same among the European and Indian communities in the country and in the foreign markets."⁵³ Had the government taken a keen interest in the reorganization of the Association in the early 1920's, it could probably have played a more active role in the marketing of cottage products and at the same time freeing the artisans from the domination of the money-lenders in the business.

⁵² See, "Notes on Bengal Home Industries" in BSR : PAI(I), B Proceedings, Bundle No. 5, File No. 2G/5 of 1938.

⁵³ Letter No. 5194 dated July 15, 1940 from the Director of Industries, Bengal in BSR : PAI(I), Bundle No. 12, File No. 2G/19 of 1940.